



SOUTH FLORIDA REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY

PUBLIC OPINION STUDY

Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The South Florida Regional Transportation Authority (SFRTA) commissioned a Public Opinion Study aimed at assessing the perceptions and attitudes of residents in South Florida regarding the needs, deficiencies, and potential funding for public transportation. A series of three surveys were implemented to elicit opinions and views from volunteer participants including: the quality of existing public transportation services, perceived barriers to using those services, general needs for the future transportation system, funding priorities, willingness to support a dedicated funding source for public transportation services, (the level of support for a number of transit improvement initiatives) and the factors or circumstances that would need to be changed to attract them to use the public system.

The three different survey methodologies developed and utilized to conduct the study include:

- Web-based Survey
- Telephone Survey
- Focus Group Meetings

The results from these surveys will assist SFRTA's planning and marketing efforts. SFRTA intends to use the results to identify the potential service/operation changes and passenger amenities that may need to be provided and broader initiatives that should be considered for implementation. In addition, these results will be used in future regional transportation studies and may have an impact on local and regional public transportation decisions and on potential legislation.

This Executive Summary gives a brief overview of the results of the Public Opinion Study. The study was conducted from November 2008 through January 2009. The Web-based Survey was available at www.helpsouthfloridatransit.com and was advertised throughout Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade Counties. The Telephone Survey was conducted by the Florida Survey and Research Center at the University of Florida, by using purchased Random Digital Dialing lists for each of the three counties. The Focus Group Meetings were conducted with volunteers who already had participated either in the Web-based Survey or Telephone Survey. A Focus Group Meeting was held in each of the three counties.

Many of the questions asked during the Web-based and Telephone Surveys were identical. The results of these questions were merged and compared. Demographic profiles were asked of the participants during both the Web-based and Telephone Surveys. The Focus Group Meeting questions were open ended, contained similar topics as the Web-based and Telephone Surveys but allowed for more in-depth answers and discussion. All Focus Group Meeting participants remained anonymous. They were identified by first name only.

Web and Telephone Results

The questions asked to both survey groups can be divided into five (5) basic categories:

- Utilization of public transportation services;
- Awareness of public transportation services;
- Perception of public transportation;
- Future needs
- Preferred funding sources

A summary of the responses for each of the categories follows:

Utilization of Public Transportation Services

A little more than one-half (55%) of the respondents did not use public transportation within the past three months while a little less than one-half (45%) did use public transportation within the past three months. The principal reason for not using public transportation was lack of convenience, characterized by lengthy time of travel, inconvenient schedules and public transportation not coming close enough to home. The respondents who did not use public transportation within the past three months said they would be more likely to ride the train than the bus.

Of the respondents who have used public transportation within the last three months less than one-third (27%) typically use it to commute to work. The principal reasons cited for use of public transportation were convenience and the current amount of traffic congestion.

Awareness of Public Transportation Services

More than three-quarters (85%) of all respondents were aware of the major rail services in South Florida, including Tri-Rail and Metrorail. The Miami-Dade Metrobus was only slightly less known. The respondents were not as familiar with the other public transportation services available in the three county area such as Dial-a-ride and van pool services. The agencies and authorities, such as SFRTA, that provide the service were even less known to the respondents.

Perception of Public Transportation

Two-thirds (66%) of all respondents believe that public transportation is extremely important to South Florida's overall transportation system; they also believe that traffic congestion in the area is high and the need for bus and rail services will increase greatly over the next 5 to 10 years. All of the respondents generally agreed with and acknowledged the benefits of public transportation, ranging from its importance to the elderly and disabled to its environmental friendliness.

The respondents were about equally split on their perception of the public transportation services currently being provided in South Florida. A little less than half (43%) had a positive perception and a little less than that (38%) had a negative perception of public transportation in South

Florida. The remainder said they had neither a positive or negative perception of public transportation in South Florida.

Future Needs

The respondents believe the top priority for future improvements to public transportation should be rail extensions. Both the extension of Metrorail and the extension of Tri-Rail were popular, as was the building of new light rail systems. However, the respondents also said increasing county bus service and expanding the hours of current services were necessary. The least favored improvement was the idea of providing bus-only lanes on major roads.

Preferred Funding Sources

The respondents preferred multiple funding sources for public transportation. The most popular funding sources, and about equally so, were the use of developmental impact fees, the redirection of road funds, a rental car surcharge and a gasoline tax.

The least popular source of funding for public transportation was the imposition of a property or income tax. The use of a sales tax as a source of funding scored neither notably high nor low for preference. More than one-half (58%) of the respondents agreed that the tolls from the new managed lanes should also be used as a source of funding for public transportation rather than for new roads.

The respondents were almost equally split between being unlikely and likely (43% to 39% respectively) to support a tax increase today to fund the existing public transportation system. The respondents' answers diverged slightly with 46% unlikely and 36% likely to support a tax increase to help fund regional improvements.

Half (51%) of the respondents who were unlikely to support a tax increase cited taxes as being already too high as the major reason for their lack of support. More than three-quarters (78%) of the respondents who would support a tax increase would continue their support if gas prices "fell" to \$2.00 a gallon. However, if gas prices were to "increase" to \$4.00 a gallon, that support decreased to less than one-half (42%) of the respondents. During the life span of this survey, gas prices fell unexpectedly and coincidentally from approximately \$4/gal to \$2/gal.

Focus Group Results

There were eleven questions asked in each of the three Focus Group Meetings. A synopsis of the respondents' opinions follows:

Topic #1: *Reasons Behind Use or Non-use of Public Transportation*

The majority of the participants interviewed were not daily users of public transportation. This group said the principal reason for non-use of public transportation was the inconvenience of schedule times, variance in performance of Tri-Rail during the off-peak hours and difficulty in accessing the stations or bus stops. Public transportation simply did not meet their needs, either in terms of locations for accessing the system or schedule.

The participants who used public transportation, in general, had convenient and accessible public transportation available for their commuting needs. A few overcame problems of accessibility through the use of bicycles. One participant kept a car parked at the Tri-Rail station overnight at the work (destination) end of the trip and a second car parked at the beginning of the trip and driven home each night. A few participants simply used public transportation as a matter of environmental principle.

Topic #2: *Desired Improvements*

The improvements desired most often by the participants were ones of convenience such as expansion of schedules, improved frequency of service and improved local connections from Tri-Rail to local service and ultimate destinations. Participants also said they wanted more intense advertising of available services within each county.

Topic #3: *Future Adequacy of Public Transportation in South Florida*

The groups almost unanimously believed that the current public transportation system is inadequate due to limited scheduling options and poor connectivity to the local systems. Future improvements, as listed above, would be needed both in the short-term to make the system more convenient and in the long-term to attract additional ridership.

Topic #4: *Capital Improvement Approach*

The groups felt the approach of implementing both short- and long-term improvements was best. Short-term improvements, once accomplished, would increase public awareness and acceptance of public transportation, improving support for long-term investments. Some short-term improvements mentioned were the installation of Wi-Fi, cocktail and coffee cars, better bus service, better mechanical maintenance and better use of the currently available funding. Some long-term improvements discussed were securing dedicated funding, changing the public mentality towards public transportation and completing currently planned capital improvement projects.

Topic #5: Public Participation

The groups thought the public, particularly people currently using Tri-Rail and the local systems, need to be involved directly during the planning stages. They also thought that every method of communication imaginable should be used, including advertisements in widely-circulated newspapers to the innovative personal digital assistant (PDA) compatible e-mail. The public does expect public officials to be pro-active in their outreach. The method of interviewing focus groups was well-accepted as a method of communication.

Topic #6: Funding Options

Funding was a topic that individuals in the groups differed greatly in their approach with no true consensus being reached on specific funding options. Although there were individual exceptions, the groups had a perception that additional funding was not necessary to pay for public transportation projects. The groups were in agreement that the State was not doing enough to support public transportation, but the majority of the participants felt that reallocation of current funds, such as taking from highway and other projects, was the best method of increasing public transportation revenue.

Topic #7: Taxing Options

A solid majority of the participants opted for a sales tax to support public transportation, although many participants had the perception that additional funding was not required. The group listed specific parameters or serious caveats for a sales tax, such as clear justification, detailed planning and in-depth reporting of progress.

Topic #8: Public Official Support

The majority of participants supported electing a candidate who either advocated a new tax or a reallocation of current funds to improve public transportation, as long as the need was well-articulated and the candidate was a knowledgeable advocate of public transportation.

Topic #9: Funding Support for Strategic Regional Transit Plan

The Strategic Regional Transit Plan and the associated cost were presented to the groups. The groups were asked to select choices on how to fund the Plan such as gas tax, sales tax, auto title fee or registration fee, and tolls. The choices did not elicit general agreement; instead, numerous alternatives were suggested such as a rental car surcharge, a “gas guzzler” tax, or no additional tax at all.

Two main themes emerged for paying for the Plan. The first idea was that additional revenue should be tied to automobile use (auto registration, tolls, gas tax). The second idea was support for a three-tenths (3/10) penny sales tax. Individual participants expressed specific opposition to the choices provided, making it difficult to select one choice as the most popular.

Topic #10: Transit – Oriented Development (TOD)

Transit-oriented development (TOD) was explained as a way of supporting and increasing public transportation ridership. The idea of TOD had enthusiastic and unanimous support from all of the group participants. In general, the participants wondered why the concept of TOD was not more widely used or accepted in the area. They believed it made common sense for today's life style.

Topic #11: Environmental Concerns/Perceptions

The participants fully acknowledged the environmental friendliness of public transportation. Some even rode public transportation to support the environment. Many participants felt convenience, cost savings, and time-savings were equally important factors effecting their decision to use public transportation.

Study Conclusions

The responses to all parts of this study are the respondents' opinions. Totally factual conclusions may not be able to be reached. Opinions do express perceptions and to the extent that perception of an issue builds or destroys support for that particular issue, conclusions may be drawn. The conclusions below are based on the answers given by the general public, inclusive of the Web-based survey, the Telephone Survey and the Focus Group Meetings, on the broad topics of the study.

Utilization of Public Transportation Services

Convenience and ease of access to public transportation is the most important factor that drives the decision to use or not to use public transportation. The overwhelming answer why people used public transportation was that it was convenient and accessible. The overwhelming reasons why they do not ride public transportation is that it takes too much time, public transportation does not come close enough to home and schedules are not accommodating.

Awareness of Public Transportation Services

The major rail services, including Tri-Rail and Metrorail were well known among survey respondents while parent agencies, such as SFRTA, were not. The available bus services were also lagging behind in familiarity compared to major rail services with the respondents.

Perception of Public Transportation

While respondents were overwhelming aware of the benefits of public transportation, they did not feel that the system was adequate for the future nor did they have the confidence that their voices, needs and desires were being heeded.

Future Needs

An overwhelming majority of the respondents believed that the need for public transportation would grow in the future. Rail extensions and more convenient bus services were the most popular capital improvements desired. Consideration should be given to completing short term improvements first such as schedule changes and expansion of bus services.

Preferred Funding Sources

Preferred funding sources was the one area that defied consensus building and hence is difficult to arrive at any significant conclusion. A number of common answers and themes, however, were present throughout all three surveys. Popular options included the reallocation of current funds to public transportation and acquiring additional funding from sources that were related to automobile use such as a gas tax or registration fees.

Conversely, less popular but still frequently mentioned options were: a sales tax, but only if the need was carefully detailed, and the levy of a property or income tax.